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Jeffrey, Francis Jeffrey,
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Observations on Mr.
Thelwall's letter to the
editor of the Edinburgh
review

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OBSERVATIONS
ON
MR THELWALL'S LETTER
TO THE
EDITOR
OF THE
EDINBURGH REVIEW.

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OBSERVATIONS, &c.

THERE is nothing that can be thought to require an answer in this Publication, but the assertion that the success of Mr Thelwall's lectures in this city was obstructed by the efforts of a confederacy. If Mr Thelwall himself believe this, he must have a very exalted idea of a conspiracy that could dispose, at its pleasure, of the patronage of this 'intellectual city ;' and a still more exalted idea of himself, who was thought worthy of being made the object of such a confederacy. Unfortunately for both parties, however, the assertion is entirely without foundation. The individuals alluded to possess no controul over the public opinion; and it certainly never occurred to them that the lectures of Mr Thelwall were of importance enough for them to confederate either for their support or their suppression. The idea of such a confederacy, indeed, must be altogether ridiculous to those who know the place and the persons; but as nothing is absolutely incredible, that only supposes extreme folly in young men, it is proper that those facts, as to which Mr Thelwall has published his conjectures, should be correctly stated by those to whom they must necessarily be known.

Mr Jeffrey, to whom Mr Thelwall has been pleased to ascribe the formation of this dark conspiracy, entered the room on the night of what Mr Thelwall calls his probationary lecture, after the first act of the performance was over; and consequently had not the satisfaction of hearing that animated apostrophe to the malignity of reviewers which is said to have produced so much uneasiness in a part of the audience. Mr Jeffrey came in company with a single friend; and one other person had mentioned, in the morning, that he would probably be there also. With the exception of these two

persons, Mr Jeffrey had not the slightest reason to suppose that he should meet with a single individual of his acquaintance in the course of the evening ; and it is an unquestionable fact, that neither to those two friends, nor to any other person, had he intimated any design of opposition to the lecturer, or concerted with them any plan of behaviour. There was not an individual, indeed, among those whose gravity was afterwards so unfortunately discomposed, who had formed any clear conception of the sort of entertainment they were to receive. Some of them certainly expected a display of considerable oratorical talents ; and they of course laughed the loudest. Mr Jeffrey was not near the screen during any part of the performance ; and though he changed his seat once in the course of the evening, he had all along the benefit of a full view of Mr Thelwall's countenance ; who, according to the common rules of optics, must have had the same advantage as to him. He was not at all in the Court of Justiciary from the time of the lecture till after the publication of the Letter ; and never in his life uttered a word, that he knows of, in Mr Thelwall's hearing. There is reason therefore to fear, that Mr Thelwall's physiognomical observations have been made on a wrong subject.

As this simple statement of the fact (for the accuracy of which, all those who had any opportunity of knowing are ready to give their testimony) puts an end to every idea of a conspiracy, it is not absolutely necessary, perhaps, to explain how the laughter was excited, or to what degree it was indulged. For the information of those, however, who might otherwise be misled by the eloquence of Mr Thelwall's description, it may not be amiss to observe, that the laughter throughout was of the most moderate and decorous nature imaginable, being entirely of that suppressed or smothered kind which takes place when the sense of propriety is overcome by any thing irresistibly ludicrous. There was no hissing, or hooting, or exclamation, or any voluntary symptom of unbecoming emotion whatsoever. The tittering, however, was certainly pretty general ; since, out of about eighty persons who

were

were present, upwards of twenty have avowed it to the writer of this statement.

Those who have had the good fortune to hear Mr Thelwall recite the Massacre of Bangor, or the Ode to the Passions, will be at no loss to comprehend the cause of this phenomenon. The whole recitations, indeed, were inimitable, and appeared to be considerably superior in effect to any representation of Sylvester Daggerwood, or Dick the Apprentice, that has been lately exhibited in this country. If any man, with a moderate propensity to laughter, can listen to these recitations, as they were that night delivered, with a grave countenance, he is welcome to believe that the Edinburgh audience laughed out of malice, and not from the mere impossibility of avoiding it. After all, however, it does not appear that those who laughed at the lecture had a worse opinion of it than those who listened gravely. It is uncertain whether any one of the latter ever came back; whereas, it is an unquestionable fact that the cessation of Mr Thelwall's exhibition was a sore disappointment to several of the former clas, and to many of the friends to whom they had earnestly recommended it. Mr Thelwall may therefore console himself with the assurance, that there was no confederacy against him among the persons with whose behaviour he was dissatisfied on the first night of his lecture, and must be contented with imputing his want of success to the general stupidity, illiberality, and prejudices of this corrupted city.

Something still remains to be said of the Review of Mr Thelwall's life and poetry. To those who have perused that interesting performance, no explanation can be necessary; but as it is still unfortunately but little known in this part of the country, it is proper to give some account of the manner in which it has been represented by the Reviewers.

As the notion of a confederacy is altogether out of the question, it is scarcely necessary to mention, that the Reviewer of that article has no recollection of having seen Mr Thelwall's advertisement of January 1803; and has not met indeed with more than one person who has ever heard of it. If there had not been a great

scarcity of respectable publications, the book would probably have been allowed to repose among the trash which accompanied it; and it was reviewed, after all, with such a degree of attention as is usually bestowed upon the more insignificant articles.

Mr Thelwall's first charge is, That the reviewers have gone out of their way to attack *an unpublished book*. There is a mystery in this accusation, which renders it infinitely more terrible. To an unskilful eye, this same unpublished book bears upon it some very suspicious symptoms of publication.

1st, It is entered in Stationers Hall, according to act of Parliament.

2dly, It bears on the title-page the names of three London booksellers, and one in Dublin, &c.*

3dly, It appears that the said booksellers have actually disposed of one entire impression; for the Reviewer's copy is marked as the *second edition*, and Mr Thelwall alleges that the sale in June 1802 had exceeded 1500.

4thly, The price, being 7s., is annexed, to prevent imposition on the public.

5thly, There is mention made of subscribers.

6thly, It was advertised as a new publication in the Monthly Magazine for September 1801, vol. 12. p. 233, and came down in the common monthly parcel for the Review.

Finally, This copy now lies on Mr Constable's counter, who is boldly resolved to sell it openly as a published book to any one who will give him the price of it, and to order another as soon as he has been able to dispose of that which has lain so long on his hands.

These circumstances certainly afford a tolerable apology for the mistake of the Reviewers in considering this as a published book, and may induce the charitable part of their readers to believe that they were not conscious of trespassing on Mr Thelwall's

* Sold by West and Hughes, Paternoster-Row; R. Philips, St Paul's Church-yard; and James Ridgeway, York-Street, London; J. Stockdale, Abbey-Street, Dublin, &c.

wall's private recreations, when they offered some remarks upon this volume to the public.

This, however, is but a prelude: The main piece consists in charging the Reviewer with having committed something more than a dozen of gross and malignant falsehoods in this short article. As most of the instances are really very curious, they shall be set down as nearly as possible in a chronological order.

1. The Reviewer's first malicious falsehood consists, it seems, in having 'stated as the general characteristic of Mr Thelwall's boyhood, that tardiness and apparent ineptitude, which only resulted from bad health, and grief for the loss of his father.' To this, there are two answers: 1st, The Reviewer has *not* represented this tardiness, &c. as the general characteristic of Mr Thelwall's boyhood. He has only said, upon the authority of the Memoir, that he was whipped for it at school: how long he was whipped, or how long he deserved to be whipped, the Reviewer has by no means presumed to determine. 2^d, It is rather unfortunate that Mr Thelwall, in denouncing this atrocious calumny to the indignation of the public, should himself have fallen into a little inaccuracy, which we are afraid may injure the effect of his appeal; for, on looking at the Memoir, we find that the alarming symptoms already mentioned are so far from being confined to the occasion Mr Thelwall alleges, that they are expressly said to have extended beyond it. After specifying the effects of his grief and ill health, Mr Thelwall says, 'This was *not* the only season of his boyhood during which his tardiness and apparent ineptitude occasioned him to be considered as of a slow, and even feeble mind.' Memoir, p. 5.

2. The second intolerable falsehood is, that the Reviewer has deranged the natural order of this precious biography, by transposing two of its principal events. He has stated, that Mr Thelwall, when wearied of the life of a shopman, attempted to go on the stage before he tried to become a painter; whereas the truth is, that he tried to become painter before he attempted to get on the stage! As this tremendous charge appears from the book to be perfectly well founded, the friends of the Review have nothing for it, but to hang their heads in silent consternation.

3. The third falsehood is still more abominable. The Reviewer has most impudently asserted, that Mr Thelwall's consciousness of want of voice and want of figure, concurred to make him relinquish his designs upon the stage, when, in fact, there is not the least shadow of pretence for such an insinuation. Now, though it be true, that in the sentence where Mr Thelwall narrates his repulse from the Theatre, he glances only at his want of figure, yet it is not less true, that, in the page preceding, it is distinctly stated, that '*his voice and lungs were particularly feeble and defective:*' Memoir, p. vi. And in p. xiii. it is added, that '*he was subject to frequent attacks of asthma and inflammation of the lungs.*' *

4. The next falsehood is dignified with the epithet of *transcendental*, and is quoted as an instance of the utmost limit of human turpitude

* Such are the only foundations for the Reviewer's rash insinuation, that Mr Thelwall was conscious of want of voice. When that voice was heard, however, Mr Thelwall assures us, that the consternation of the whole junto was unspeakable, and that they could think of nothing more adviseable than to cry him down for having *too good a voice!* The eloquence and the humility of this part of the epistle, tempt us to extract one passage: 'Then,' says Mr Thelwall, 'Then—my system of elocution must be execrable—my doctrine of physical pulsations and musical proportions must be false—my physiological distinction of vocal and enunciative organization must be trash—my disquisitions on accents and emphases must be ridiculous nonsense—and my theory of vocal punctuation, and definitions of the powers and application of the respective points—downright bladerdash! and these, and every other part of my system, ought to be condemned unheard—Because—I have an EXCESS of voice, and because the inflexions and varieties of that voice are so much more extensive than those of Mr Cooke, Mr Kemble, and Mrs Esten!!!'

p. 96. Mr Thelwall's modesty has here suggested an accusation, which would probably have escaped the most quicksighted of his calumniators. If any persons shall be found so utterly devoid of taste, candour, and judgement, as to assert, that Mr Thelwall's 'physiological distinctions of enunciative organization, &c. &c. are trash, nonsense,

turpitude and profligacy. It consists in saying, that ‘ Mr Thelwall had been appointed one of the poll clerks to Mr Horne Tooke upon his first canvass for Westminster ;’ whereas the Memoir affords no pretext for making any such assertion. The reader shall judge. On p. 24. of the Memoir, it is stated that Mr Thelwall made a speech at the Debating Society, warmly reprobating the compromise that had taken place between the two first candidates, and hoping that a third candidate might come forward and be supported. Next day, he received an intimation that there would be a third candidate ; and this message ‘ was accompanied with the unexpected offer of an appointment as one of the poll clerks on that occasion.’ The new candidate was Mr Horne Tooke ; and Mr Thelwall soon became so enthusiastic in his favour, that he threw up the situation he had accepted, ‘ that he might indulge his ardour in a laborious canvass, &c. for his favourite candidate.’

Now, as it is greatly to be feared that the organization of a Westminster election is but very imperfectly understood in this remote part of the empire, it is possible enough that the Reviewer may have made some mistake in the representation he has given of this affair. Whether a poll clerk is appointed to one candidate, or to the whole, is a point upon which Mr Thelwall is no doubt well qualified to illuminate the whole critical fraternity ; but that Mr Thelwall was appointed in consequence of having declared himself zealously for the third candidate, cannot be denied ; and that he was ardently attached to Mr Tooke’s interest, is more apparent from his own narrative than from the statement of the Reviewer. It is in the former only that the reader will find it acknowledged, that ‘ the temporary salary of 24s. a day was no unwelcome consideration.’

‘ nonsense, and bladerdash,’ we are rather inclined to suspect that they will assign some other reason for that opinion, than the unrivalled excellence of his voice. The Reviewers certainly never did think of comparing him to the eminent performers in question ; nor did they conceive it possible that such names should be associated with his, till they perused this edifying epistle.

5. The Reviewer's fifth falsehood consists in representing the time Mr Thelwall spent in an attorney's office as 'a *very idle* period of three years and a half ;' for which epithet, it is said, neither the text nor the context afford the slightest authority. The text is—‘ At this profession he continued three years and a half, studying the poets and philosophers more than cases and reports, and writing elegies and legendary tales, more frequently than declarations on the case :’ Memoir, p. 16.—Is there any attorney in the Lanes, that would desire a more complete picture of an *idle* apprentice ?

6. The next falsehood that is set down in this list of the Reviewer's iniquities, consists, it seems, in having said, ‘ That Mr Thelwall read a paper in a society of medical students, containing so undisguised a defence of materialism; that it was voted out of the society,’ &c. ; the truth being, that Mr Thelwall had read several papers in that society, *the last* of which alone was treated in this ignominious manner. It requires some ingenuity to find out the falsehood here. It is not denied that Mr Thelwall did read a paper which was voted out, &c. ; and that is exactly what the Reviewer has stated. The circumstance of other papers having been previously read, which did not meet with so memorable a reception, does not seem naturally to affect the correctness of this statement. Mr Thelwall should recollect, that it is only the characteristic, the remarkable, and the instructive passages of his life, which the Reviewer has attempted to commemorate.

7. Another grievous falsehood in the Reviewer, is his having said, that Mr Thelwall ‘ somewhere informs us, that upwards of two thousand copies of his book have been disposed of.’ It seems Mr Thelwall only said upwards of fifteen hundred. The number was quite out of the Reviewer's recollection, and he could not even tell where he had seen the assertion, till Mr Thelwall kindly directed him to the Monthly Magazine. It is curious, however, to find this mistake quoted as an instance of malignity. Mr Thelwall's assertion as to the sale of his book, is repeated, certainly, without the most distant insinuation against

its correctness ; and, if credit is given for the sale of two thousand copies, instead of fifteen hundred, both the book and the author are likely to gain in reputation. If the reviewer had represented Mr Thelwall as having said that *only five hundred copies* had been sold, there might have been some pretext for suspecting a wilful inaccuracy.

8. It would be fatiguing to go through all the minor charges *. The last instance shall be that most famous falsehood which Mr Thelwall, according to his own phrase, has *emblazoned* in the text of his epistle, and dilated upon through upwards of twenty pages. This charge purports, that the Reviewer has most falsely and basely inserted as a quotation from Mr Thelwall's book, certain scandalous and abominable words and phrases, that are not to be found in that exquisite performance. The answer is, that the phrases in question, are nowhere asserted to be Mr Thelwall's, and that they are quoted only as the Cant or Slang of a certain description of persons, to whom Mr Thelwall had

been

* It is believed that there are only two more : the one is, that the Reviewer has asserted that Mr Thelwall, during his retreat in Wales, ' was persecuted by *all* his neighbours ; ' whereas it is stated in the Memoir, that some of them ' came gradually to regard him with less hostility,' (Memoir, p. 37.), and one man actually conceived a sort of affection for him. The other is, that Mr Thelwall's romance has been falsely characterised as being ' full of freezing spirits and songs about ale,' when, in reality, there is only one scene *full* of freezing spirits, (though a freezing spirit is admitted to be a material agent in the drama), and no more than one entire song about ale, though the praises of that enlivening beverage are scattered through many passages of prose. The Reviewers do not think it necessary to answer these dreadful accusations. Neither can they admit that they have attempted, in this instance at least, to practise the new art which they are said to have discovered, ' of enriching themselves, by filching from others their good names.' (p. 25. Note.)—Mr John Thelwall has an exceeding good name ; but the Conductors of the Edinburgh Review, at the utmost height of their envy and malice, never dreamt of enriching themselves by filching it from him.

been previously assimilated. The entire passage in the Review, is exactly as follows :

In every page of this extraordinary Memoir, we discover traces of that impatience of honest industry, that presumptuous vanity, and precarious principle, that have thrown so many adventurers upon the world, and drawn so many females from their plain work and their embroidery, to delight the public by their beauty in the streets, and their novels in the circulating library. They have all ‘ ardent temperaments,’ like Mr Thelwall, ‘ irritable feelings, enthusiastic virtues, and a noble contempt for mechanical drudgery, dull regularity, and slow-paced erudition.’ Their performances need no description.

Now, it is conceived that no one who reads this passage attentively, can ever suppose that the concluding part of it is a sentence quoted from Mr Thelwall; it is a description of a class of persons of whom Mr Thelwall had no occasion to speak, and it describes them by a selection of that sentimental jargon and philosophical gibberish, by the use of which they are most readily distinguished. The words are put in inverted commas, to show that they are not the Reviewer’s words : whose words they originally were, it would not be easy to determine ; but they are now the common property of the gang or corporation whom they are employed to characterise, and are used very freely by most of its ingenious members. Mr Thelwall is classed in that corporation, no doubt ; and no one who reads his Memoir, will call in question the justice of the classification ; but whether he has actually made use of all the appropriate words that are here quoted from the *vocabulary of his sect*, is a question of no importance : they are not quoted as his words, but they are applied to him as the words of the novelists and adventurers whom he is said to resemble.

In this point of view, it would be of little consequence, although no part of this impassioned phraseology could be found in Mr Thelwall’s Memoir : but the truth is, that by far the greater part of it is to be found there, and much more than enough to satisfy the reader, independently of other evidence, that the Reviewer has judiciously classed him with persons of a kindred taste and disposition. In the beginning of the life, for instance,

instance, we have ‘the ardent and independent spirit who is the subject of this Memoir’ (p. 8.); and we soon hear abundantly of ‘his over irritable nerves’ (p. 9.); his ‘feelings which enthusiasm persuaded him were the badges of intellect, and the distinctions of virtue’ (p. 17.); the ‘irritability of his mind’ (p. 38.); his ‘enthusiasm’ and his ‘temperament’ (p. 42.); his ‘distaste for business’ (p. 7.); and ‘his indignation and abhorrence of his trade.’ (p. 13.) &c. &c.

But the Reviewer has still something more to answer for in this unfortunate paragraph. Mr Thelwall maintains, that he has never, in all his life, given any indication of impatience of honest industry, presumptuous vanity, or precarious principle; and that to ascribe those dispositions to him, is therefore a flagrant breach of veracity as well as of charity. All this, no doubt, is matter of opinion; and Mr Thelwall is probably quite as sincere in his encomium upon himself, as the Reviewers undoubtedly were in the observations that called it forth. They can by no means pretend, indeed, to so intimate a knowledge of the subject; but there are some facts upon record that seem partly to justify their insinuations. There are severe and vulgar persons in the world, perhaps, besides the Reviewers, who would be apt to call in question the industry of a youth who, before the age of twenty-two, had successively broken his indentures to three regular professions, purely because he had an ‘abhorrence of trade,’ and ‘a distaste for drudgery;’ and who has since lived as an Itinerant Lecturer on Politics, History, and Elocution. Of vanity, it is to be feared, few, even of Mr Thelwall’s admirers, will acquit him; and if the imputation be not justified by the epithets already quoted from the Memoir, it can only be necessary for the reader to recollect that this is the second time the public has been favoured with the history of an individual who is notorious only for those adventures which his enemies alone should wish to be remembered *.

As

* If Mr Thelwall had not, with a rare mixture of vanity and bad taste, obtruded on the world a bombastic account of his professions and disgraces,

As to precarious principle, the Reviewers are fully aware that the phrase is somewhat objectionable. The Champion of Materialism, the Orator of Chalk Farm, and the Committee Man of the London Corresponding Society, will probably be thought by most people to deserve a more decided epithet. But, upon mature deliberation, the Reviewers are still inclined, for their own part, to retain the language they originally employed.

For Mr Thelwall's general strictures on the literary merits of the EDINBURGH REVIEW, the Conductors are greatly obliged to him. The work has unquestionably many faults, and verbal inaccuracies in great numbers. A few of those which Mr Thelwall

has

disgraces, the Reviewers most certainly would never have dragged them into notice. Genius, they agree with him, must command respect in every situation; and where it has to struggle with unfortunate circumstances, it is entitled to a double share of veneration and indulgence: But though Franklin was a tradesman, it does not follow that every tradesman should be a Franklin; nor is it absolutely unlawful to laugh at those whom the splendour of such examples has seduced from their natural destination. For Mr Thelwall's family afflictions, and the embarrassments which his 'distaste for drudgery' has brought on the innocent persons with whom he is connected, the Reviewers certainly feel the most sincere compassion. If they were capable of making these circumstances a subject of derision, they would deserve nearly all the abuse which Mr Thelwall has poured out against them. But though they were not called upon, in their Review of Mr Thelwall's book, to express any sentiments of this nature, it is rather remarkable that the concluding sentence of that Review, to which Mr Thelwall has carefully avoided all allusion in his Letter, should be in these words: 'Middling as Mr T.'s poetry is, however, we shall be happy to find that it affords him a subsistence; because it is a great deal better than his politics. There are some passages in the Lamentation for his Daughter's Death that are written with tenderness and effect; and, if he will renounce all pretensions to epic and dramatic fame, and publish his next volume of Effusions without any Prefatory Memoir, we shall be glad to hear that he has sold four thousand of them, instead of two.' It certainly is not very likely that these writers should now laugh at Mr Thelwall's paternal sorrows, or confederate to deprive him of subsistence.

has pointed out, have been marked for correction in the Edition which is now in the Press, and the rest shall be amended as soon as the Conductors are satisfied that Mr Thelwall's proficiency in grammar is equal to his zeal for the correctness of their publication. It is to be lamented, however, that his information as to the Conductors of the Work, and the authors of the different articles, should be so extremely inaccurate; though the mistakes he has committed upon this subject are excessively amusing to the small number of persons who are in possession of the secret. The Reviewers are sorry that they cannot feel so much warmth in the defence of their work, as Mr Thelwall has shown in attacking it: It is a secondary object with all of them, and was undertaken more for the purpose of amusement, and of collecting the scattered literature of the place, than from any other motive. It has succeeded far beyond their expectations, and probably will not be altogether annihilated by Mr Thelwall's tremendous denunciations.

Upon the whole, it is to be hoped that this short statement of the facts will enable Mr Thelwall to regain his usual tranquillity of spirits, and set his mind at ease from the dread of Scotch conspiracy and malignity. It is rather mortifying, indeed, to the pride of philosophy, to observe how little Mr Thelwall seems to have profited from his long experience of persecution and abuse. After having had his chair and desk overturned by the peace-officers in the Borough (p. 25.): After being nearly murdered at Yarmouth, Lynn, Wisbeach, Norwich, Stockport, and Darby, (at the first of which places he was nearly carried off to Kamtschatka (p. 30.), and being pummelled and pelted * through

a

* These are not exactly Mr Thelwall's words—he only says 'that he was assailed at Ashby de la Zouch by a mob of soldiers and loose people, against whom he was obliged to maintain his ground singly for a considerable time.' But the expression is given as in the text, on the authority of a celebrated poet, who has already immortalized this part of the philosopher's sufferings.

' Thelwall, and ye that lecture as you go,

' And for your pains get pelted, praise Lepaux.'

a number of other places : After being ‘ successively attacked by the Sailors, the Armed Associators, and the Inniskilling Dragoons,’ (p. 30.) ; and ‘ ferociously assaulted with a pick-axe’ by a rustic royalist at Llyswen (p. 37.) ;—it is really wonderful that he should take it so violently amiss, that a few nameless critics should laugh at his Book, and some idle young men at his Lectures. Such a tremendous discipline, one would imagine, might have steeled his heart against smaller calamities, and enabled him to speak with some degree of temper of an outrage, which began with the payment of 3s. 6d. for admission to his Lecture, and ended in a few half-suppressed titters at some parts of the performance. The delinquents cannot pretend, indeed, that they are very penitent for their offences ; but they can assure Mr Thelwall, that there was neither plot nor malice in the business, and that they will laugh at him again, with the utmost good humour, the first time he gives them an opportunity.

Mr Thelwall’s over-irritable nerves may probably induce him to reply to this pacific declaration ; but the authors of it can afford to write no more for his conversion, and must be contented to remain hereafter among the silent admirers of his genius.

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